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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

classically liberal views, read books, and was interested in politics since I was young. These aren't subjects in school, but there are auxiliary programs from the West, even if not particularly successful ones, and neoliberal views are always forced upon us. All you can learn here as as a “reasonable” person is neoliberalism; nationalism is ultimately irrational. Later I joined my university's philosophy faculty. I still remember well a moment where several things came together at the same time. Firstly, even if they were able to remember some of the Soviet Union, the lecturers taught Marxism exclusively from a philosophical perspective. Secondly, I noticed that the classical liberal capitalist doctrine, according to which hard work leads to a good life, isn't true. I got to know people for whom that didn't apply at all; the smartest, most literate people, with whom I shared similar interests, were living very precariously. This is the tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it affected people not because they lost their homeland, but rather because the Soviet Union gave them quite a lot and prepared them for a different life. Once they found themselves in capitalism, they were simply unable to adjust due to lack of resources, skills, and strengths. For example, the Soviet Union trained excellent engineers, who had to pursue primitive projects after its disintegration. Their educational level didn't match their standard of living at all. Thirdly, I was reading a lot of classic literature, on this I like to recommend to everyone John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In this story about the U.S. during the Great Depression and the proletarianized rural population's struggle to get by, I recognized a lot from my own life. This motivated my engagement with socialism, with the Soviet Union as the closest actual example of socialism in the past, and with other Left-wing theories. After university, I learned these Left-wing theories by myself, starting with philosophy, moving to sociology, political science, and the history of the Left.

KD: What do the lecturers at the university and their past have to do with this? Do they talk about the era of the Soviet Union, all these theories, and do they pass on their knowledge?

V: Marxism is treated here like something of the past. For the lecturers, it isn't a conscious Marxism, but more something that they themselves once had to learn at a university. If they need to explain something, they sometimes talk of what they had to grapple with in their youth. Many people were conscious Marxists, but they could never write Marxist articles in school; that cannot and will not happen here, given that Kyrgyzstan is a backward

V: We aren't the first generation to refer to itself as Left-wing with points of contact with actual, i.e. intellectual, traditions of the Left — not with the Soviet Left, which belongs to the past. Just as you in the West have a different capitalist past and learn about the American melting pot, class struggles, reforms, and the history of neoliberalism; or, as home-grown American would recollect about the 50s: “I could beat my wife, the negroes weren't allowed to ride the bus, and my life was beautiful!” People here remember the Soviet Union with a similar nostalgia. That puts us in a paradoxical situation. To be sure, there are still people here who organize themselves in a Soviet socialist tradition. However, the Soviet Union was never intellectually interesting for them; it is rather formal, purely ideologically, and in accordance with the classic phrase, “Everything was better in the good old days.” I, on the other hand, came to the Left from an intellectual path. I became familiar with Marx first and then became a communist — not the other way around. My younger comrades are coming to a Leftist movement under the influence of changed social conditions. I always explain to them that it's important to understand how Leftists live in other parts of the world. This has a long and difficult history behind it, out of which ignorance has accrued. Eastern Leftists' biggest prejudice is the idea that the true bearers of communism and consciousness come out of the Soviet Union and there was no genuine Left in the West, that all the Left had disappeared by the time of the Cold War and today's isn't a real Left, because it doesn't like Stalin, never lived in the Soviet Union, and sold out. I'm working to stave off this myth. Hence, the goals of KyrgSoc and Platypus seem to be similar: to facilitate exchange between Leftists around the world.

KD: Do you tell your comrades that the Left in the West also loves Stalin?

V: There's also a generation of people in the West, of the Third International, who never lost their connection to the Soviet Union and always oriented themselves around it. Now if we're talking about Stalin, I've got a good example. People here regard Stalin not as a theorist or Bolshevik with a Left-wing outlook. They see him in a patriotic spirit as a national leader, who brought the country forward and won the war. That he was a socialist isn't so important. Many Leftists confuse their patriotism with socialism. When these things coincide, we get into a tricky situation, which has its roots in our Soviet past.

I am a prime example of the way people with intellectual aspirations here grow up. I had

prospects, and no career opportunities. The shadow of the Soviet Union continues to exist. Looking at its achievements, people are at first still uncritical towards Stalinist propaganda. Years after the end of the Soviet Union, the dreary battle of Stalin against Trotsky continues to exist in the post-Soviet space. With my title as pedagogue, I did not make people read Trotsky, but instead diverted them away from topics of the 1930s and 40s until they learned more. Towards the end, we just read other critics of the Soviet Union (not a particularly sophisticated trick); ultimately, the USSR continued to exist after Trotsky's death. The people in the reading group understood that the Soviet Union was better than contemporary Kyrgyzstan, but also that it wasn't communism or socialism in the Marxist sense of the terms. Generally speaking, it wasn't the “realm of freedom.” Nevertheless, this was the greatest project that ever strived towards communism, and unfortunately did not attain its goal.

But we can't stop at reading. If you already read Marx, then you ought to know; it's not enough to explain the world; we have to change it. This requires political work, which is why we founded an organization. We don't have any immediate aspirations to influence politics via standing for elections or working with political parties. Our principal task is to popularize our views. That's what the current situation calls for. The language of Marxism, which we both speak and understand, is opaque to people here in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, we need to do lots of education and propaganda work and, on the other hand, we need to observe. We must study Kyrgyzstan independently, write articles, prepare scientific papers, and carry out observations that are lacking today. We need to show with reference to empirical data what kind of country we live in, what its problems are, and how we can solve them. After this, we will devote ourselves to the task of Marx.

KD: How did you come to the Left? Which Left-wing thinkers have influenced you?

On May 30, 2022, Platypus Affiliated Society member Kathrin D. interviewed Vlad (27), a member of the Marxist group KyrgSoc (KypPrCoU) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, about the legacy of the Soviet Union in Central Asia and resulting challenges for the Kyrgyz Left. Vlad is dedicated to the rebuilding of a living Left tradition in the former Central Asian Soviet Republic. The interview was conducted in Russian and translated by Kathrin D. into German for publication in Die Platypus Review. The English translation was prepared by Max Klein and is based on the German publication of the interview. An edited transcript follows.

Kathrin D.: You're a member of the group KyrgSoc. When and how was it founded? Who are its members?

Vlad: We have around 30 members, mostly in Bishkek. The organization was founded in 2020. We began as a Marxist reading circle, and didn't exclusively study Marx, but rather Left-wing theory in general. We would read over the course of one year, starting with the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and subsequently many contemporary Russian Marxists, like Boris Kagaritsky or Alexander Tarasov. What was important for us as post-Soviet people was to read post-Soviet thinkers who could explain to us what the Left is today. Western authors aren't well suited for this, as they don't share our context, but we would read Western authors too: Terry Eagleton, David Harvey, writers associated with Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, and South American writers on the problems of regressive states. We were trying to establish a link to our concrete problems: Kyrgyzstan is a poor country in a decades-long decline. We would always choose individual topics, like the women's question or the national question. Naturally we read Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917) and *Imperialism* (1916). We read selected works by Trotsky, but not much from classical Trotskyism. Because lots of young people here naturally come to the Left not because they lived through the Soviet Union, but rather because they have no social security benefits, no

Kathrin D.

Searching for a common language in the post-feudal age

An interview with Vlad

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An interview with Wolfgang Streeck

Will Stratford

“To correct the inegalitarian bias inherent in capitalism”

An interview with Wolfgang Streeck

Will Stratford

On March 9, 2023, Platypus Affiliated Society member Will Stratford interviewed German public intellectual and labor activist Wolfgang Streeck, former professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Cologne, author of several books on the political economy of capitalism, and current emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. They discussed a variety of issues confronting the German Left, including neoliberalism, the Aufstehen (Stand Up) movement, the German Left’s alienation of AfD voters, the war in Ukraine, and both the degeneration and prospects of Leftist politics today. An edited transcript follows.

Will Stratford: As a university student in the 1960s, you studied sociology in Frankfurt under Theodor Adorno among others. What was Adorno like as a professor?

Wolfgang Streeck: The German system is different from the American system. Adorno, as I got to know him, was someone who gave a lecture course two times a week standing at the podium and speaking in absolutely printable German, without ever hesitating at any point, about things of which I understood very little. It was at the time not part of the ethos of a German professor to worry whether his students had actually understood what he told them. That was for them to take care of.

Stratford: Would you say that Adorno or the rest of the early Frankfurt School generation had an impact on your thinking?

Streeck: Absolutely, yes. Studying there left an interest in, and respect for, classical sociological theory, generally theories of whole societies, including Marxist theory — a little in analogy to the biology of whole organisms (which went out of fashion in the 1960s, in favor of cell biology and biochemistry, just as the sociology of whole societies went out of fashion in the 1980s in favor of all sorts of microsociology). I must add, in my case, that I had a second leg that helped me save my sanity. I had been involved in social-democratic politics from my early youth on, already when I went to Gymnasium. It was part of my early rebellion that I didn't just move in the circles of my school but also in the local SPD.² Later, Frankfurt was a place where the SPD was on the Left of the national party in the 1960s and 70s. It also happened to be the national headquarters of IG Metall,³ the powerful metalworkers union, which was then the powerhouse of the radical Left wing of the German trade-union movement.

I taught courses at IG Metall education centers alongside my studies at the university, and I was one of the leaders of the SPD's Young Socialists section in Frankfurt. This became formative for my future life. I had this talent for, or at least love of, scholarship, while at the same time I was, and occasionally returned to being, a political activist on the social-democratic Left, though with a growing sense of melancholy, due to that sort of Leftism becoming increasingly marginalized politically in the neoliberal era.

Stratford: During your student days, you were active in the high point of New Left activity around 1968, and in 1969 you co-founded the Sozialistische Büro,⁴ which sought to unify the socialist forces in West Germany. How do you assess this activity looking back on it? How did the New Left fail or succeed?

Streeck: As a student at Frankfurt, you were obviously part of the New Left, but I also had my feet in the Old Left. I always felt that the Left should not lose its relationship — historical and social — to the working class, however composed, and the labor movement. In the Social Democratic Party, we supported Willy Brandt, who in 1969 became the West German chancellor. I belonged to the democratic-socialist generation of the 1970s when European social democracy was ascendant, with Brandt in West Germany, Olof Palme in Sweden, and Bruno Kreisky in Austria.

In the 1970s, having studied critical theory at Frankfurt, especially with Claus Offe, and in the background Jürgen Habermas — Adorno died in 1969 — I thought I should learn about the technical questions of governing an industrial society. In 1972 I went to the United States to study at Columbia University, especially with Amitai Etzioni in the sociology department, who had just written a book that had deeply impressed me: *The Active Society* (1968), which was an attempt to graft an activist, democratic-technocratic perspective onto the Parsonian system theory of the time.⁵ The book was soon forgotten, although not by me. I remained interested in both fundamental social change from below in modern societies and the governability of such societies and their change, an unlikely combination.

Stratford: I want to move significantly ahead and talk about more recent political phenomena, starting with neoliberalism. In the years following the Great Recession of 2008 and the ensuing

European debt crisis, you made a name for yourself as a Leftist critic of the European Union. Your work has drawn attention to the political features of neoliberalism, such as the widespread attrition of an active life in political parties among civilians, the decline in trade unions and strike activity around the world, and the retreat into identitarian culture wars. Why have these aspects generally evaded critics of neoliberalism, and how has the Left been implicated in such neoliberal politics?

Streeck: Neoliberalism, certainly its European branch, was to a significant extent an attempt by social-democratic political parties to respond to a situation where capital had become increasingly powerful as a result of the internationalization of the capitalist economy. Unlike in the 1960s and 70s, capital was now mobile, it could leave, which was an important threat for social democrats that had built their politics on a national state capacity to regulate capital so that it fit into an egalitarian social project.

Stratford: It's interesting that you're emphasizing the agency of social democrats in the inauguration of neoliberalism.

Streeck: Take, for example, Tony Blair and New Labour. The 1970s and 80s were a period in which capital had become more powerful in the permanent struggle over the content of what you can call the social contract between capital and society. That led to declining prices, as it were — capital had to pay for the collaboration of the working class, or of society, with profit-making, or surplus-production, as Marx calls it. In the United States beginning in the 1970s there was no increase in real wages anymore, while the inequality in the distribution of income and wealth took on oligarchic dimensions.

Stratford: You're talking about the interdependence of capital and labor inherent to modern capitalist society. What about the Left and how it relates to this?

Streeck: Social-democratic parties facing this had to answer the question of how they might be able to govern in a world in which capital had become much more powerful. The neoliberal turn on the Left was to try to live with the new pressures for economic competitiveness of national societies, by promising their traditional constituencies public support in adjusting their lives, and society as a whole, to the increased demands of capital, at the same time urging people to assume more responsibility for their economic situation, for example by undergoing training and retraining. The social-engineering part of social democracy shifted from “how can we build an egalitarian society?” to “how can we build a competitive society and thereby defend our prosperity?” It soon turned out that capitalist competitiveness did not produce egalitarian prosperity, didn't require it, and indeed was inimical to it.

Stratford: Was neoliberalism itself a product of the failure of the Left and its abandonment of the working class of the Old Left?

Streeck: That would ascribe too much agency to the social-democratic parties and trade unions of the time. They were observing that there was something going on in their societies, which was a building pressure emerging from the economy for social life to become more compatible with growing demands of enterprises — firms, banks, etc. — for societies to contribute more to the accumulation process and remove any remaining social obstacles to capitalist surplus-production.

Stratford: So you're saying it's more about objective conditions than something that the Left was responsible for?

Streeck: It was a question of how one interpreted the new situation, which was not easily deciphered. For example, what you saw in many countries was that the decline of the size of the industrial workforce was beginning to accelerate. But you could always believe, or make yourself believe, that this was just for the moment, and after a while the trend would turn out just a conjunctural blip.

You could also see that jobs of all sorts, even in services, were moving abroad. For a while people, including me, believed that more sophisticated products could only be produced in countries with a high skill level, so that social investment in workforce skills would halt or slow down outsourcing. What is important to keep in mind is that politics works on a short timescale, whereas large social change moves slowly. On the way you can always make the mistake of thinking that things weren't really changing and what was happening was not on a linear trend but a cyclical movement that would ultimately return to the regression line, with the right kind of policies.

Stratford: A few years ago, you joined the movement Aufstehen, which was started in 2018 and led by the Die Linke⁶ politician Sahra Wagenknecht. What was Aufstehen, and what happened to it?

Streeck: It is interesting to think back to it because it shows how fast things have been going. At the time, we thought that in each of these parties — the SPD, Die Linke, and the Greens⁷ — there was a Left — either core or fringe — and that they could form a cross-party alliance with a joint program, which a coming center-Left government would not be able to overrule. The idea was to move a future center-Left government to the Left, by concerted action of the Leftist elements of the three parties.

Stratford: That's describing it purely as a kind of consolidation, but I understand that it also involved a sort of focusing. It was known for its critique of political correctness, and one of its goals was to win back some of those who had voted for the AfD, which is considered a far-Right populist party. Can you say more about this strategy?

Streeck: I think it was clear to us, as it is today, that among those 10–15% of German voters who vote for the AfD — today maybe even 20% — there are those concerned with things about which voters of the Left are also concerned. But they're not reached by the political parties as they exist now. For us it was important for democracy to not let them drift into a brown corner.⁸ Among parts of the Left, the slogan was and is “Nazis out.” We wondered where “out” would be. Short of having their citizenship taken away from them, or a civil war, they would continue to be around in German politics. What would we do if they drew 30% of the vote?

There was also the problem, which exists up to the present day, that the parties of the center had tacitly arranged themselves with the AfD by instrumentalizing it to foreclose public debates. Issues that the AfD raised were immediately declared taboo simply because it was the AfD who had raised them. Questions like, “what is our immigration policy?” and “In what areas should the European Union be entitled to overrule German national policy?” could be ruled out of the question by the government and the mainstream media on these grounds.

Stratford: This sounds a lot like how the Democratic Party in the U.S. campaigns on anti-Trumpism rather than offering solutions to many of the legitimate issues that Trump has raised — dysfunctional immigration, job loss, hawkish foreign policy, the deep state, etc.

Streeck: For example, you talk to friends in the trade unions, and after a while when discussions begin to open up, they will tell you that, say, yesterday they had been attending a conference of trade-union delegates in eastern Germany, and were shocked that so many among their colleagues, comrades, brothers, and sisters would claim that the only party that actually takes them seriously is the AfD. They wondered what to do about it. Should there not be a democratic organization that could take up these interests and thereby move them out of the dirty corners of our political system? Or was this a time to repeat the civil wars of the 1920s hoping that this time, unlike then, it would be us winning?

Stratford: There are many isolated Leftists in the U.S. who understand the greatest problem today to be the Democratic Party's stranglehold on any possible momentum of building a socialist Left. Within the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), there appears to be a longstanding but growing crisis between a minority calling for a complete break with the Democrats and a majority who resist this. Do you see a similar situation in Germany? Was Aufstehen a movement to build an independent socialist party?

Streeck: First of all, the SPD had lost its monopoly on the Left, and there was now Die Linke, which for a while played the same role for the SPD that the AfD is now playing for the rest of society. If anyone in the SPD suggested that we could form a government together with Die Linke, they were dead on arrival. It was a taboo. You were not supposed to talk about it. Aufstehen was an attempt to highlight the — we thought — really existing possibilities of overcoming this gap, and to extend from there into the Left wing of the Green Party. It was not intended to set up a new party. It was an attempt to build a core of Leftist allies from three parties.

Stratford: The DSA might say the same thing, and it is also not a party.

Streeck: If you want to revive Leftist politics, which is a very difficult project anyway, by setting up a party that claims that we are going to have socialism within the next 10 years if only you vote for us — that is a recipe for disaster. What a program for a Left party would be today is elusive. For example, what would its platform be in a social-welfare state, which Germany still is to some extent, unlike the United Kingdom? Since Die Linke refrains from asking this question in the first place — because they are afraid of their party breaking apart over it — almost all they do is demand higher social-security benefits and the like. But in that field the very able Hubertus Heil of the SPD, who is Minister of Labor in the present government, is hard to beat because, unlike Die Linke, he can pass real legislation rather than just raising demands and making promises.

Stratford: Some believe that the entire neo-social-democratic moment in the late 2010s — Sanders in the U.S., Corbyn in Britain, Mélenchon's La France Insoumise⁹ in France, and Die Linke in Germany — was just nostalgia for the national welfare-statism of the Fordist era, typified by the call for a “New New Deal.” What do you think? Did the neo-social-democratic turn point backwards to pre-neoliberal

capitalism or forwards toward post-neoliberalism?

Streeck: We hope it would point forward, but it would require some serious thinking about what this policy would be. It would include new patterns of participation, with an emphasis on collective consumption and collective goods in education, transportation, health care, all these fields that have been suffering from neoliberal austerity. Regionalization, more power to people on the ground, an emphasis on communal well-being rather than national handouts of 200 euros for everyone, new forms of collective property and self-government, promotion of cooperatives, etc., in a way that would be a return to older ideas of what life in socialism would be like, with an emphasis on the social underpinning of individual life. At the political macro-level this would affect the fundamental question of public finance, of how you finance the collective necessities of a good life in a modern contemporary society.

Stratford: A year ago, shortly after the start of the ongoing war in Ukraine, you wrote an article in the *New Left Review* highlighting the unchecked escalation of the war by Western pundits.¹⁰ How has the war in Ukraine helped secure European allegiance to NATO, and what are the dangers of this?

Streeck: Especially after the end of communism but also reaching back into the Cold War, the question always was, to what extent can European states provide for their own security without the U.S. ruling over them and telling them who their friends and foes are and what to do with and about them? Take, for example, Willy Brandt's policy of détente, which was viewed with great suspicion by Nixon and Kissinger. Similarly, when Germany and France refused to join in the expedition to Iraq in 2003, with Schröder and Chirac declining the invitation to join the “coalition of the willing,” or Merkel and Sarkozy in 2008 vetoing the accession of Ukraine to NATO.

It didn't lead to much because of two factors that are still very much in effect. One is that European striving for “strategic sovereignty,” as it is sometimes called, could be successful only if Germany and France found a common position. But that has been and still is difficult because the two countries have different interests: Germany as export champion and France with its nuclear force. The other is that Germany, not being a nuclear power, houses the biggest concentration of American military outside the U.S., with 38,000 American troops with 25,000 family members and a lot of military hardware, including nuclear arms, stationed all over the country.

Stratford: What about the Left in Germany? How are they responding to the war in Ukraine?

Streeck: What I observe in the generation taking the reins politically, especially its Green section, is a widespread Manichean worldview: there is good and evil, we are on the side of good, and evil has to be fought no matter what because otherwise it overtakes us. Today's evil is found both internationally, from Russia to China to Iran, and nationally, in the form, for example, of the enemies of LGBT+ — both “fascists” in the new political worldview. Nationally and internationally this requires a permanent war on fascism. This doesn't allow for much compromise.

Looking back at the peace efforts of the Cold War in the 1970s, there was the idea that there were different states in the world with different social orders, between which there could be a balance of power and interests, and therefore peace. There was also a Third World that would legitimately stay outside of the confrontation between liberal democracy and communism. You could have, or hope for, a system of international security governed by the United Nations. Now, in what is flagged as a global battle between democracy and authoritarianism, it comes down to the brutal idea that what counts above all is military superiority — for example, the bizarre idea of the current German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, who suggested that because of the treatment of women in Iran, the agreement with Iran on nuclear non-proliferation should not be renewed, in order to punish Iran. Peace as a reward for virtue, not as protection from war.

Stratford: You recently gave a lecture in Berlin about the return to the nation-state.¹¹

Streeck: What I said is, there is no question of a return because it still exists.

Stratford: Nonetheless, there seems to be a tension between necessity and possibility in your assessment of the current impasse. You seem to be saying that global finance capital's supersession of national sovereignty in the neoliberal era was premature. One way to interpret this is through the historical struggle for socialism under Marxist leadership, which saw the need to overcome democracy and the state precisely through the battle for democracy and state power. Socialists grasped the necessity of national democracy dialectically, to be realized and thereby negated. On the other hand, one interpretation of your work is that the very possibility of moving beyond national democracy is an impossible fantasy. Is this not simply political pessimism? How do we face up to current necessities without completely giving up on future possibilities?

Streeck: Pessimism may be realism in our time. But of course, you have to offer more than realism. For me, if as a socialist I think about something like economic self-government, politics controlling markets rather than markets controlling politics, the building of societies on strong collective goods,

where is the institutional framework within which you can do that? Looking around for historical examples, the Scandinavian states have for decades now been able to combine a strong sense of national sovereignty and popular democracy with attempts to build egalitarian societies. Some such combination, under changed circumstances, may be what one could aspire to.

Stratford: The core readership of the *Platypus Review* is made up of university students and young intellectuals inspired by the grandeur of the historical Left, from the bourgeois revolutionaries to the organized Marxists, which tasked itself with driving history forward by reaching ever new levels of human freedom and civilization. To many of these readers, today's Scandinavian welfare states fall far below the promises of the 19th-century Left. What would you say to them? Is it in vain for them to find hope from a historical tradition no longer clearly active today?

Streeck: Utopias are always in motion. It cannot be the same utopia in the mid-19th century as at the beginning of the 21st century. For example, in the last 200 years, modern societies have developed in a direction of individualism and demands for individual autonomy that requires new modes of social integration and solidarity that we still have to find if we don't want to end up in an Ayn Rand-like society of ruthless libertarianism. The collectivism that the early socialist tradition was looking for seems neither possible nor, perhaps, desirable today. What still holds is Marx's dictum in the *Grundrisse* (1858): man is a political animal in that he can be an individual (*sich vereinzeln*) only in a society. Neoliberal capitalism is not a society that can integrate human diversity in social solidarity.

Stratford: Are you calling for a retreat from the historical Left's internationalism into national democratic politics?

Streeck: No, I don't call it a retreat. I call it the construction of governable entities in a global order that can be democratic, rather than technocratic or market-ocratic. Democracy I consider to be above all an institutionalized opportunity for a political society to correct the inequalities inherent in capitalism. Technocracy, bureaucracy, and market-ocracy cannot achieve this correction; without it, however, societies become hunting grounds for the strong, with the weak as prey.

Stratford: Do you see democracy in the nation-state as a short-term necessity until more radical possibilities open up in the future?

Streeck: I cannot imagine a world government, or world state, that would be democratic or could hang together without having to rely on military force. As to the short versus the long term, and "radical possibilities in the future," classical socialism seemed to believe that, once capitalism had been abolished, the capitalist-bourgeois state and politics in general could also be abolished, to be replaced by "rational administration," what today would be called technocracy. Without class conflict, why do you need states as sites of political rule, meaning political oppression? One may or may not agree with this. What seems clear in this light is that neoliberal globalization, or globalism, is an attempt to abolish the state before the abolishment of capitalism, replacing the democratic state by "global governance." To me this would amount to the ultimate victory of capitalism over democracy.

Stratford: In other words, the original Marxist goal of overcoming the state is no longer on the table?

Streeck: I'm not a waiter at the restaurant of history, nor am I a customer who can place orders. History is not a restaurant anyway; in fact, it is a battlefield. In a modest sense, I posit that citizenship is a central civilizational achievement of the modern era that is inseparably linked to something like state authority: the capacity to govern a distinguishable social community on a territorial basis. There is no citizenship or rights of citizenship outside of states. Stateless societies in the modern world are societies with failed states; they are governed by local and global warlordism, like countries in Central America, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, you name them. Life under failed states is "nasty, brutish, and short," except for those with the guns and the Wall Street bank accounts to pay for the gunmen. Not all states are democratic; far from it. But the only social entity that is capable of being democratized by and for the benefit of its members empowered as citizens is the nation-state. **JP**

¹ Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany).

² Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany).

³ Industriegewerkschaft Metall (Industrial Union of Metalworkers).

⁴ Socialist Bureau.

⁵ Named after American sociologist Talcott Parsons.

⁶ The Left (Party).

⁷ Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen.

⁸ The Sturmabteilung (Storm Division), or SA, of the Nazi Party wore brown shirts.

⁹ France Unbowed.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Streeck, "Fog of War," *New Left Review: Sidecar* (March 1, 2022), available online at <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/fog-of-war>.

¹¹ Wolfgang Streeck, "Zurück zum Nationalstaat? (Back to the Nation State?)" at Helle Panke e.V., Berlin (March 2, 2023), available online in German and English at <https://www.helle-panke.de/de/topic/3.termine.html?id=3426>.

“Searching for a common language,” cont. from page 2

influence. You want a high up position? You simply write a denunciation and take the other's place: like in Germany, you say your neighbours are Jews and then get their flat. Most of the elites ended up in this flywheel and were replaced by exactly such people. There were also Kyrgyz, not Russians, who were sent down. The Kyrgyz language nevertheless kept being taught in schools, and Kyrgyz film and culture were further developed.

There was intensified Russification in the course of the Second World War, the "Great Patriotic War." The internationalist state, cosmopolitan in some aspects, began to orient itself towards the Russian nation, which the Soviet Union now defined. This appeared in its entire territory. The Russian population and culture began to play a larger role. Political and economic privileges may not have been maintained, but cultural ones were in a light form, such as the privilege of being a white person. Nonetheless, very little changed otherwise. Kyrgyzstan remained an organic part of the Soviet Union with large population growth that grew into the millions, and the people lived, worked, served in the Soviet army and constructed common public Soviet institutions. Kyrgyzstan was no Soviet backyard, but a fully-fledged Soviet Republic with all its rights. It's interesting that the Kyrgyz fully obtained their national self-determination during the Stalinist period in 1936. Whereas it was previously autonomous, just like the Karabakh region, in 1936 it became a full Soviet Republic, i.e. an independent Soviet Republic. This is why the Kyrgyz have their state, even if it is a small population. Without Soviet power, we would probably be living like the Uyghurs or Kurds. The Soviets had an exclusively good influence on Kyrgyzstan.

KD: What did this change of status under Stalin mean for the potential of a world revolution?

V: Kyrgyzstan wasn't autonomous even under Stalin. Local power here was always oriented to Moscow. Lenin established that the Soviet Union was to be a federation, in practice a confederation. After Lenin's death, the path towards the further independence of the Soviet Republic wasn't carried on, but also wasn't changed. Stalin had a big dispute with Lenin from the beginning. The former was for a unitary and centralist state, in which there should not be any autonomy or autonomous republics at all. The Leninist position won out. Indeed, Stalin didn't amend the constitution, but neither was he persuaded by the Leninist position.

KD: What was the Leninist position?

V: The right to self-determination up to secession, that the peoples of the Soviet Union should come to socialism autonomously. Many claim that wasn't a part of Lenin's theory, but simply his policies, because he always had to shore up a majority of the national minorities who were oppressed and had no rights in the Russian Empire. In Lenin's texts and his political actions, contradictory statements can be found on top of that, which, on the one hand, aim for national autonomy, but, on the other, Lenin didn't want the nations to gain complete independence. Ultimately, he believed in the world revolution, and of course it would have only been postponed if the Soviet Union had turned out smaller.

KD: You mentioned British colonialism along with Russian colonialism. In India, for example, the British Empire likewise brought progress and modernization. Looking back, where is the difference with the Soviet Union in Central Asia?

V: The difference lies not in the economic approach. Large empires were similar in this respect. It is for this reason that I do not count the Soviet Union as a socialist state. In many areas the Soviet Union was the conductor of capitalism for backward regions. But there was also socialist modernization, which didn't have a capitalist character, even if that's nonetheless where it ended up.

The Soviet approach was humane and didn't pursue the goal of absorbing surplus value and accumulating capital. It had other humanistic motives, and that differentiates it from other colonial powers. To a large extent, a utopian-Marxist mission stood behind it. For the Soviet Union, founding cotton production companies in Central Asia wasn't due to economic necessity, but served to acquaint a backward population with labor and civilization. You've probably heard of the development of virgin soils when they began to cultivate the Kazakh Steppe with grain. A lot of effort was put into this under Krushchev, but it was unprofitable, because grain grew much better in the Ukraine or in Russia itself. They only did it so that the Kazakh population would transition to sedentary life. We see the same thing as well in Kyrgyzstan. Our republics were never economically profitable. The economy here was always subsidised. It's a pure economic consequence of irregular development, which points us back to the study of world-systems theory. But the Soviet Union always made the effort not to exploit these republics. It doesn't look like classical colonialism.

KD: Why did Kyrgyzstan, despite everything, inherit a post-feudal consciousness from the Soviet Union?

V: The political status quo in the Soviet Union is difficult to judge. What was the general political consciousness of a citizen? Who, in the political sense, was the Soviet person? The USSR wasn't a state with a capitalist class system, but a state striving towards socialism. The political categories Left and Right refer to the opposition of classes in society, which did not exist in the Soviet Union. Therein lies its historical

particularity. That's why it's difficult for me to draw a straight line and use classical categories from political science to judge what was in the Soviet Union.

KD: Why didn't it work? There was no world revolution . . .

V: Without giving a conclusive answer, I look for the answer in the backwardness of the productive forces in the Soviet Union, which for most of its history was a backwards state. Coming out of the ruins of the backward Russian Empire, which didn't have the same level of productive forces as the West, it had to catch up with the West. It sent people into space and, with this, technical progress in the Soviet Union was terminated due to its political imperfection. Freedom of discussion and workers' democracy, which could have brought the late USSR forward from its conservative essence, were destroyed. Public relations were backwards and, in their core, not socialist, which is why the Soviet Union was doomed. However, if you look at the whole story, the history of the Soviet Union was not a defeat. If we compare the Soviet Union with advanced countries (the U.S., with Europe), you can say that the West was more successful. But when we compare the USSR with the whole rest of the world, it made breath-taking achievements against the exploitation of people by people, with a great aspiration for socialism, for social justice, which must not be forgotten.

KD: Some of your articles aim to make this legacy productive for the future. How is it constituted and how can it be made productive?

V: Regardless of whether the Soviet Union is a failed historical project, it determined the form of the 20th century. Historians situate the beginning of the 20th century in 1917 and its end in 1991. It had an influence on the whole rest of the world. Due to fear of revolution, Western countries made recognitions to the working class. Simultaneously the Soviet Union's endeavour for progress caused universal technological progress. Why did Soviet man strive for the cosmos, wasting large sums of money? The conquest of the cosmos could not have been completed on the scale of a national project in the West. The Soviet Union led from backwardness into modernity: not like the Indians and Native Americans through famine and mass murder and exploitation, but on a straight path. That's why I'm not close to different post-colonial studies who criticize progress and claim that primitive ways of life, local traditions, and practices are worth being preserved. If you live in New York or Berlin, it might be interesting, but the last thing people here want is to live in such a backward society. There's nothing good about it.

KD: What do the protests in Kazakhstan at the beginning of the year 2022 mean for you? How do you stand towards Russia's invasion and the Collective Security Treaty Organization? How do you assess the armed conflicts, such as over drinkable water on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, or the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian role in it? As a group, you emphasise the necessity of an internationalist struggle. Is the shared Soviet past of Russia and all the smaller, former Soviet states a chance or an obstacle to this?

V: The events in Kazakhstan didn't interest us much, as coup d'états and political unrest aren't anything new for Central Asia, especially not for Kyrgyzstan. And now it's Kazakhstan who's up next. Of course, there are some differences, but it's relatively similar. There isn't anything important or meaningful to it. We view Russia as imperialist. But I do not see any large role for Russia in the Karabakh conflict. That's a historical regional conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, like the conflict between Germany and France over Alsace-Lorraine. Whereas in the Ukraine, Russia is pursuing imperialist interests. Russia acts as the primary imperialist hegemon for the whole post-Soviet space, which directly affects our lives. We are locked into a Russian capitalist microcosm, which in turn plays its own role at the global scale. We have a lot of material on this on our homepage and social media accounts.⁵

Can our shared cultural background in the post-Soviet space help us in the future to unite us again to lead a socialist struggle? Here we have to proceed as Marxists, dialectically. There's the large imperialist influence of Russia which calls back to the Soviet past: "Why do we have to love Russian capital? Because we used to be one country!" It's bad when viewed from this angle, because it harms our national markets and drives us into greater dependency on Russia. Whereas the Soviet Union used to share with us, and sometimes gave us even more, Russia doesn't share at all now. We just give it migrant laborers. All the goods we buy are Russian. Our oil is Russian oil.

There are also positive elements, namely the post-Soviet cultural public sphere, which still more or less understands itself as a shared space. If a Kyrgyz and a Russian meet in Europe, they can understand each other perfectly, in a common language, Russian. They will understand the cultural context, even if they were already born after the end of the USSR. If we assume for the future that Left-wing mass movements will arise, it can play a role that the region as a whole strives towards socialism. Then it could have what Europe didn't have at the beginning of the 20th century. At the time of the First World War, everyone was driven into different corners, which destroyed the Second International and forced all states to strive towards socialism in isolation. A comparison here with the EU immediately arises. It if can play any positive role, it is that people from the European space at some point in the distant future won't see economic enemies in each other, but will take a step towards

a socialist state, even if it must be affirmed that the EU now is an absolutely barbaric structure in the economic sense. That's exactly what it's like with us.

KD: What is the task for the Left in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in light of all this? How does it relate to the Left's international situation? What would the task of a party be; how would it stand towards the social movements and the workers? Do you still see any potential for the construction of an independent socialist party?

V: We're convinced that the most important thing right now is our work on theory and the popularization of our views. We are assessing our forces adequately and cannot rely on receiving support from Leftists in Russia or Europe, since we don't have anything to impart to them. We need to occupy ourselves with what happens here. That is an unavoidable necessity. Considering the role of the working class, we do not deviate from classical Marxism. We do not believe that the proletariat has forfeited its progressive essence. This corresponds to what we see everywhere in the world, and the whole world is struggling to grapple with it: starting in Red May, 1968, the Left exposed the workers, who traded in their freedom and didn't want to fight for socialism anymore; vacations and an eight-hour day were enough for them. This strikes us as a temporary configuration. Neoliberalism pushes workers inevitably to the Left. The working class will learn its lessons and won't involve itself any more in arrangements with the bourgeoisie and the social democrats, but will be increasingly more radical and communist in structure. This is precisely the hope we have for the Kyrgyz working class, which is oppressed and is living in an awful state.

KD: According to your homepage, Chile, among others, presents an example for you for the struggle against neoliberalism. After the election of Gabriel Borics from the party Convergencia Social,⁶ the social movement lost its strength and now limits itself to pure reformism. How do you assess this? How do neoliberalism and Marxism relate to each other?

V: I don't pay particular attention to what happens in Chile. The connection between neoliberalism and Marxism is obvious. We live in a world with a global economy, just like Marx lived in a time of national economy. It's neoliberalism that acts as an ideological defender of this global economy at all levels. That's why we should expose neoliberalism and create tools that can resist it everywhere. The situation has become more difficult, because, if the working class found itself earlier geographically in one spot, today it looks like this; I live in Kyrgyzstan, but the Kyrgyz working class, almost a million workers out of a population of only 6 million, works in Russia. The people here grow up and then leave the country to become guest workers and send us money, from which we live here. That's a fully-fledged working class that supports us. A simple question for me as a Marxist is, who is going to make the revolution? These workers are degraded, without rights, and angry, but paradoxically they can't serve Kyrgyzstan at all in the political sense. Without an understanding of neoliberalism, I'll never be able to approach the question of how to initiate a revolution. How will Kyrgyzstan, which is heavily in debt, exist in economic reality? How are you meant to further develop your own economy in such circumstances? Why is our working class going to Russia? Because there are no jobs here. What can we do for there to be job openings here? That's a question of the critique of neoliberalism and the struggle against it. And for that reason, the connection between Marxism and neoliberalism is the most direct for third-world countries.

KD: What do you want to achieve with your project in the next ten years?

V: If we don't want to fall prey to unwarranted optimism that calls for the revolution in ten years, we should say that we want to see a real, living Left tradition in Kyrgyzstan in ten years. We feel like strangers in Kyrgyz society, falling out of it in many areas, without any possibilities of finding a common language. I have the impression that if I drop my influence and another person stops writing articles and conducting events, there won't be any Left-wing movement in Kyrgyzstan. It will simply collapse in on itself, and people will engage in something else. We want our movement to become organic, with people continually joining in, and we want this intellectual process to never come to an end. Such are the modest goals we have. **JP**

¹ Kathrin D., "Auf der Suche nach einer gemeinsamen Sprache im postfeudalen Zeitalter," *Die Platypus Review* 24 (März/April 2023), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2023/03/05/interview_kyrgsoc/>.

² The Bologna Process is a series of meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. It is named after the University of Bologna, where the Bologna declaration was signed by education ministers from 29 European countries in 1999. This process created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) under the Lisbon Recognition Convention. While Kyrgyzstan is not a member of EHEA, it has applied to become a member, and has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

³ The United States Agency for International Development.

⁴ An intergovernmental military alliance consisting of six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

⁵ See <https://kyrgsoc.org/>.

⁶ Social Convergence.

and peripheral country. And even if it were to happen; maybe they know Marx, but they do not understand Marxism. I came across Marxism by accident. After all, there was still the university after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Times have changed. We're part of the Bologna system.² All of our educational programs are developed with the support of Western institutes. By the way, these are very aggressive programs. Intellectuals and academics in the West tend towards the Left, and this then gets mixed with neoliberal educational programs: for example, through corresponding donors to the university. This neoliberal propaganda doesn't even come from the local bourgeoisie, but more so from the West, and hence it's more aggressive. See all the different western NGOs, like the George Soros Fund, that have been broadly based in Kyrgyzstan since the 90s, or even USAID.³ Their political purpose is to lend neoliberalism an intellectual expression. Maybe people at your Western universities can still come into contact with different political points of view; for us, everything is just neoliberal.

As I said, our Left was never an actual, intellectual Left. It neither read nor understood Marx, and all Leftists can offer as a counter to neoliberalism is a primitive conservatism, which is the same as what Putin's power is based on. It relates to Ukraine and Crimea by, for example, coming forward as a traditionalist counterpoint to liberal values in foreign policy through xenophobia and homophobia. Our political landscape is made up exclusively of liberals of a Western type and the neo-conservatives I've been describing.

KD: What is the difference between a genuine Marxist understanding of socialism or communism and the Soviet Union's?

V: One can approach this from several sides. On the one hand, we can take a historical perspective and use the possibilities that were opened after the 1917 Revolution as a starting point: the idea of a market-socialist structure corresponding to the New Economic Policy, to those in the Soviet Right Opposition, or Yugoslavia's situation — or industrialization and collectivization as an alternative. Even back then, there were discussions about what socialism ought to look like. On the other hand, we understand that the USSR was not and could not be socialism, because socialism entails a change of the economic formation.

KD: Is socialism an economic formation?

V: That's a purely categorical question. Socialism isn't capitalism, and capitalism is an economic formation. It goes without saying that socialism has to maintain some elements of capitalism, but there were too few in the Soviet Union.

KD: There used to be theorists in the West, like Max Horkheimer, who analyzed the Soviet Union, among others, as authoritarian states. Do you all read them?

V: We do read these authors. But here too, I cannot describe all their works as fruitful, because not all Western authors can picture the Soviet Union well enough. The USSR was isolated, and it was difficult to understand it. Contemporary works, which analyze what the Soviet Union was politically and economically from a current perspective after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are more interesting. It's a similar case with Trotskyist authors of the Fourth International, who described the Soviet Union as state capitalism in the 60s and 70s. Maybe the Soviet Union was state capitalism, but they had no idea how it functioned economically. They constructed theories that were topical. They don't have very much value for today.

KD: Are you all convinced that you can understand your current situation with Marxism?

V: Obviously. Not with Marxism in its orthodox form, but more so with Left-wing theories, which share points of contact with Marxism such as world-systems theory, discussions in economics on modern monetary theory, or postcolonial and feminist studies in the field of sociology. This complex that is referred to as Left theory is interesting for us. The Marxist method and the purely philosophical impulse that social processes are contradictory, the dialectical method — these have a definite meaning for us, but are far from being a top priority. However, we also don't reject Marx's theories.

KD: You write that, in your understanding of yourselves, the Left-wing movement in Kyrgyzstan finds itself in a post-feudal stage of development due to the destruction of the education system and the extremely low standard of living. You state that party activities and citizens' movements wouldn't make sense at this point in time and there couldn't be any Marxist theoreticians or distinctive Left-wing political movements; that you can't even situate yourselves in a return to the capitalist era, in which the first Left and Right political movements came about, but instead to the late-feudal era. Only theory and knowledge are the road to freedom at this point.

What do you mean by the post-feudal phase? What characterizes the present era specifically? How does one deal with theory without praxis? To be more precise: what is to be done with Marxist theory in the post-feudal era? Why do you need it?

V: The level of local consciousness belongs to a post-feudal epoch, like the epoch before the French Revolution, in which Left- and Right-wing currents emerged. In the Soviet Union, there was neither political pluralism nor lively discussion. Our country and the entire — once monolithic — post-Soviet public sphere again passed through this period of disintegration into classes, which happened in

Europe before the French Revolution. In the 1990s, the first bourgeoisie arose, and business start-ups and trade began. A large mass of the proletariat was formed, which was forced to sell its labor power. Of course that already had to happen before, but under more favorable conditions with social support. Now everything takes place under capitalist relations without any guarantee that you'll have anything to eat tomorrow, medical provisions, or education. If social disintegration into classes is the standard course of history, there was some sort of historical fluctuation with the Soviet Union: the failed construction of socialism.

People's consciousness remains Soviet in a lot of things. They don't see the enemy in their employer and don't comprehend why they should join unions. They associate trade unions only with the fact that they would organize summer camps for kids, and that, as the state of the vicious working class, the Soviet Union ultimately didn't need trade unions. Because the economy predefines ideology, our ideology looks feudal today. People don't comprehend why we should divide ourselves into Left and Right; why can't we just do everything together? Why can't we build a state where everyone does well? People don't understand their interests. A worker doesn't get any vacation, works 12–16 hours a day, and doesn't unite with other workers, because he has the formula in his head, that this order of things is self-evident. There isn't even the lowest class consciousness. I understand that today in the West too there isn't class consciousness like there existed at the beginning of the 20th century. Nonetheless, it is conserved among you. You have decidedly Left-wing parties, Right-wing parties, everyone discusses, and there are social-democrats who, as is well known, always lie to everyone.

KD: But you do also have a social-democratic and communist party.

V: Of course. But for us, they are more like a cargo cult. When the Soviet Union collapsed, people told us, "You need a democratic multi-party system!" That's why we have some of everything: there are social-democratic, communist, liberal-nationalist, patriotic, conservative parties, anything you want. But behind all that, there's nothing but the local elite and their financial interests. The bourgeoisie, which didn't exist in the Soviet Union, have come to their class consciousness — since Perestroika — quickly in comparison to the workers.

Approaching the workers now with concrete political ideas and telling them that we're Marxists or communists would be like talking to them in a foreign language. That's precisely why we speak of the necessity of our organization. Above all, there needs to be a group of well-trained people, who understand the political situation of their country well. Secondly, there needs to be an endeavour for common political interests: in our case, communist interests, for social improvements. We need to find a way to bring that to people.

We find ourselves in a phase preceding the presence of Left-wing circles (на докружковой стадии). In the Russian Empire, the Left-wing movement began with exactly these self-education circles, in which people learned about Marx from abroad, translated, and discussed him. They decided that they had learned enough, and they went to workers and told them about Marx. However, the poor worker saw them as provocateurs and turned them in to the police. That took place for around 30 years until the workers, under the pressure of social changes, understood that a workers' party was actually necessary: Lenin and Plekhanov were not simply smartasses or provocateurs, but political leaders who should be followed. We are now in precisely such a situation where we have to explain to people what we're even talking about.

KD: What factors led to workers being convinced by Marxist circles at the time?

V: It's a question of objective factors. We're talking about Russia in the second half of the 19th century: serfdom was abolished by 1861, feudalism is over, and labor is being freely sold. Capital is tearing peasants off of the land. This is exactly the post-feudal epoch that in Europe already began with the bourgeois revolutions: in Holland, England, and France, at a staggered pace in Germany, and only later in Russia. Workers therefore needed to provide for themselves. They passed through the process of proletarianization and gained class consciousness. It would have been completely futile in 1870 to tell them anything about Marxism; they couldn't understand it at all yet, because they were not yet proletarians. Only 30 years later could all the social democrats' work begin to bear fruit. Aside from that, there's also the subjective factor. Russian social democrats didn't sit on their hands throughout the entirety of this period. They went into factories, fled from the police, did time in prison, and pursued their work, even in places where it appeared hopeless. These subjective and objective factors came together in history and caused a socialist revolution to take place in Russia.

KD: And today there isn't any class consciousness. Hence one has to make Marxism accessible to people. And what about the objective factors today? How are they connected to contemporary post-feudalism?

V: The objective factors are on our side. We precisely understand that this situation isn't eternal and is changing, which is already being reflected in our organization. I, for example, have understood myself as a Leftist for a large part of my life, since around 2013, and throughout these 10 years I was completely alone in my political and intellectual

interests. Now allies are beginning to crop up, because the young people are going through exactly the same process that I went through because of objective conditions. This will continue as an international tendency. Even in the Western world, neoliberalism is continually distancing us from the social standards of the 20th century, the welfare state, the golden age of capitalism, etc. Now people are tending towards the Left again. Our task isn't to twiddle our thumbs and think that socialism comes about by itself; we must make proposals. And we will do this as much as we are able to.

KD: How did the situation of the Russian Empire at the time relate internationally to the situation in Western Europe? What about the context of international social democracy? How did it impact Russian social democracy's conception of itself?

V: This context exists, but not explicitly. The Soviet Russian Revolution grew out of the intellectual movement. The work that illustrates this best is Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902). He writes that the workers need an intellectual leadership — a circle of Jacobins with serious education and theoretical preparation — who can afford not to stand at a machine for eight hours a day, and can rather get engaged with intellectual activity for the good of the working class and carry its politics forward. I'm not a big advocate of this. Democratic elements are significant in the socialist movement, and a large part of the tragedy of the Soviet Union is the loss of this democratic movement already in its earliest stages. The famous discussions between Kautsky and Lenin, about whether the Bolsheviks killed democracy and precisely thereby betrayed socialism, have an important meaning. But if we rely on concrete historical examples, we see that at least Lenin achieved something.

The international aspect of the Russian Revolution was strikingly small, although the Russian Social Democrats were forced to flee and emigrate to the West, and found themselves in contact with the Western workers' movement.

KD: You spoke about a process in history: the post-feudal emancipation that took place in Europe and not in the Soviet Union. Now that there is no Soviet Union, this European history is repeating itself for you. What can be learned from European experiences for your context?

V: Yes, that's right. However, while the Soviet Union was isolated, we are now a part of the international space and occupy our appropriate role within it. For that reason, the socialist struggle in the Third World, in South America, Asia, and Africa, are more interesting to us.

KD: But the Russian Empire was also in an international capitalist context before the emergence of the Soviet Union. Was that a chance or obstacle for the revolution?

V: The Russian Empire was a part of the international context and occupied its concrete place in the global division of labor. Countries like Kyrgyzstan, which were small parts of the Empire and later of the Soviet Union, had very limited resources and small populations.

There isn't any theoretical language in which I could do justice to the question. Therein lies a problem of our situation. The Russian Left has the famous Boris Kagarlitsky, relatively concrete theories of world analysis that assess the situation of Russia, which takes up a large geographical surface and is an important political actor, and can afford to go to war in Ukraine. However, Russian theorists can only say little about countries such as ours; not even we can say anything about ourselves. In order to understand our situation, we have to dedicate ourselves to intellectual work alongside propaganda work and spreading socialist ideas. Other than that, we have a low education level, hardly any universities, and don't know foreign languages, as much as we would like to learn them. Huge intellectual challenges stand before us, which we have to manage while roaming the desert. We need to perform this work so we don't do something blindly, but act based on theory.

KD: What did Kyrgyzstan look like before the Bolsheviks? What did the Communists in Central Asia do? How did Soviet policy look with respect to national, religious, and cultural aspects? Were there different phases during the Soviet Union's, i.e., Kyrgyzstan's long existence?

V: Kyrgyzstan's territory and people hadn't been in existence for long before the Soviet Union. The Kyrgyz were nomads, divided into tribes, and their civilizational level was like that of the Native Americans in North America. In the 18th century, they settled their territory in the Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. The mountains were a bad place to live, but people lived there to hide from large and successful, culturally advanced and rich civilizations living in the valleys. At this time, the Kyrgyz tribes had no freedom and were subject to the Khanates, that is, local empires in different configurations, starting with Genghis Khan or Timur. Kyrgyzstan was always hemmed in between local empires and had to pay dues in order to exist in peace.

The Russian Empire tapped into the region, and what's interesting is that the Kyrgyz themselves asked for colonization. Russian colonialism didn't take on this form everywhere, but it was requested in our case, because it was seemingly preferable to suffering the Uzbeks and Khans. The Tsardom rejected it at first and only began colonisation 100 years later in the middle of the 19th century. The Russian Empire, out of its geopolitical interests, subjected all local empires in the area bordering Afghanistan and incorporated them into its own,

as Great Britain was colonizing further south. As a result, the border between China, England, and Russia ran right through our region. The Kyrgyz maintained their customary way of life in the mountains. In the winter they would go down into the valleys, in the summer to the mountains to graze their cattle — a primitive economy, and no culture or education. Several waves of Russians settled in the region during colonisation, including Volga Germans and Ukrainians who were looking for a better life, while the Kyrgyz were pushed further into the mountains. In the meantime, capitalism was picking up strength in the empire. This is when the exploitation began. Kyrgyz people were resettled, and their fertile land was sold to the peasants or to capital. The cultivation of wool crops began. This era ended with the issuing of a call to military service for the Kyrgyz during the First World War, which the Russian Empire was in danger of losing. In 1916 a large rebellion arose shortly before the Revolution, which ended in blood. Most of the Kyrgyz, of whom there were few (around 300,000 people), fled over the mountains to China, and there were many dead: an effective genocide, the Irkun.

During the Revolution, the Kyrgyz themselves were far away from politics due to their undeveloped state. Others had always usurped their fate. There was a Kyrgyz intelligentsia, but it was small and only came about with Soviet rule. The Soviets had humanistic internationalist principles. The Russian Bolsheviks were convinced that the local population must rule themselves independently, with their own language, culture, and territory. The Kyrgyz were completely indifferent to this. They didn't even have national, but rather late-feudal consciousness: just like Germany wasn't Germany at the time, but a collection of different realms. Each Kyrgyz tribe pursued its own interest, and they partially waged war on each other. National consciousness only comes with capitalism. The Kyrgyz were living in pre-capitalist relations. They were not yet sufficiently involved in these developments and were pulled into the system only by war; no one was interested in them before. The Revolution here had its starting point with the Russian settlers, who supported the Bolsheviks, hence why they prevailed so quickly in Central Asia. There were also episodes of civil war here, but not as violent as in Russia.

KD: The idea of the Kyrgyz nation and language was completely the Bolsheviks' idea?

V: Absolutely. A writing system was first developed only under the influence of the Bolsheviks. There was no need for it before. Everything was passed down orally, even national epics and folk tales. Only the religious elite, who made up about 2% of the population, were capable of writing. The Bolsheviks, influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, were convinced that everybody needed to read and write. If there's no language, then one must be invented. Soviet activity in the 20s was occupied with developing a Kyrgyz alphabet, Kyrgyz literacy, and putting down their history in writing. The Kyrgyz nation and culture were built from the ground up with the help of the Bolsheviks, following the classical Leninist position. Terry Martin's wonderful book *The Affirmative Action Empire* (2001) gives an account of this process. The 20s were progressive, but the more the Stalinist line took effect in the Soviet Union, the more the progressive aspects diminished. As an example, the Kyrgyz alphabet was first based on the Roman alphabet, but was converted to Cyrillic under Stalin. This is how the policy of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization) was pursued, according to which the Kyrgyz themselves, instead of Russian settlers or representatives from Moscow, were supposed to decide about Kyrgyzstan.

Korenizatsiia turned out to be successful, as a large layer of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia emerged and led Kyrgyzstan themselves, although they were paradoxically gunned down in the 30s. But these people emerged, and had above all communist views, not simply local ones; they were not simply Kyrgyz, but communist Kyrgyz! The development of Kyrgyzstan as a nation and all the accompanying processes, the emergence of consciousness — that was all communist, and the Kyrgyz thank their existence to communism; that's undeniable.

KD: Were people automatically interested in communism?

V: The Kyrgyz understood that Soviet influence gave them education. Besides that, one of the first actions by the Soviet authorities was to buy back those Kyrgyz who had fled from Russians to China and ended up in Chinese slavery. The only ones who were against Soviet power were those who lost their privileges: the former aristocracy, feudal elite, various tribal heads. They organized amongst themselves the Basmachi revolts, which took on the Soviet government, yet they had no backing in the population. The mass of Kyrgyz supported the Soviet Union throughout the whole period of its existence. Even as it was disintegrating, over 90% voted to remain in the Soviet Union in a referendum, in stark contrast to the Baltic states. Here people loved and even still love the Soviets. That's why a Lenin statue still stands here in Bishkek as in every Kyrgyz city. Nobody takes it down like in the Ukraine. There's even a statue for Marx and Engels here.

KD: What happened in the 30s?

V: It wasn't any conscious repressions, nor the wickedness of Stalin, nor a decree from Moscow that the Kyrgyz had become too autonomous and should be killed and replaced. There was simply a great terror in a bureaucratic apparatus, in which people fought amongst each other for power and